

The Catch

WINTER 2024

Cordova's Own Literary & Arts Quarterly



Flying Apart // Watercolors by Steve Schoonmaker

Souvenirs
Issue No. 11

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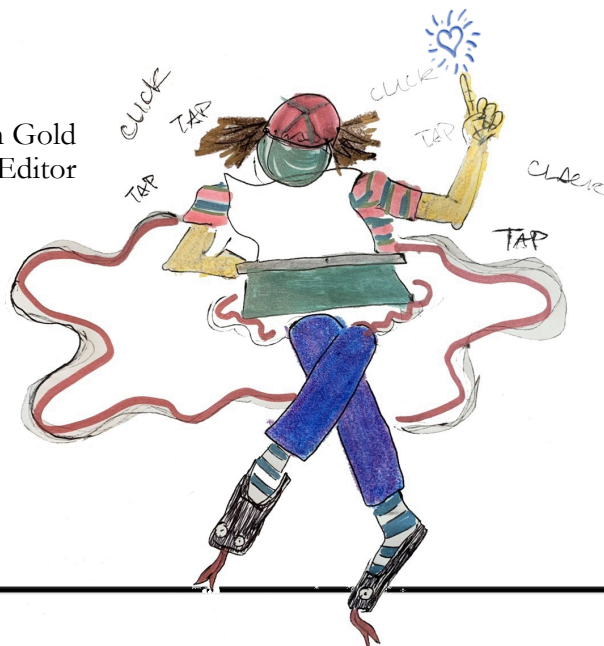
All donations go to *Friends of the Library*.

Well, friends . . . we're through the darkest bit. And each day, a little more light enters our lives. Whether it's sliding down a snowy slope, or sitting fireside with a hot cup of tea, we have plenty of occasion for appreciation. Here I'll offer heaps of thanks to all of *The Catch's* participants & audience: T H A N K Y O U! Also worthy of note, is that we have ten new contributing writers this quarter. Welcome, and we're looking forward to enjoying these and future works.

Happy New Year! And see you in the Spring . . .

With Love & Gratitude,

Jillian Gold
Editor



CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS!

ALL AGES. ALL MEDIUMS. NO ENTRY LIMIT.

Feature your art & writing in the **Spring 2024** issue (No. 12).

The theme is:

emerge

Due by March 15th.

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There is occasional use of forceful language in this publication. ***Please exercise reader discretion.***

Rhythm of Relics

By Allison Miller

It was not so long ago.
On the eastern shore at moonrise,
listening to the beginning,
watching as if starlight,
the child held a stone in her hands.
Darkly luminous, brilliantly somber,
it pulsed and undulated.

Her thumb rubbed a pool into the stone,
a severe depth.
It surged and contracted in an unearthly
beat that spanned starlives.

The girl shared the stone, let her people
feel the promise of possibility,
the weight of trust.
They warmed the stone in their palms,
and it surrendered to touch:
twisting, bending, flattened.

The stone cut wood and scraped hides,
peeled logs and dug earth.

The people used the stone to create _____ place.

This place, like the stone,
was shaped by those who loved it
before us.

Hands weathered by salt sea,
split and creaky as the backs
that generations stand upon, the hips
that cradled.

Women who gave life triumph and ease,
 birthed it then raised it
 in homes feeding fires and mouths,
 turned raw wildness to morals
 of thrift and elegance,
 passed down the warmth and grit of this place.



Photograph by Darcy Saiget

Men who gave stories depth and valiance,
gripped and sculpted nations and children,
with expansive shoulders and
a sheltering stance,
passed down the sweat and breath of this place.

The people remembered the child
who found the stone.

They adapted to changes,
and exist
as us.

Stones were brought from distant places,
found by other people,
shaped by other hands.

Glossy, transparent pebbles
in uncountable colors and specific shapes,
they were so pretty and convenient.

They made work easier so we accomplished more
 expected more
 demanded more
 lost less time.

(continues on next page)

But these pebbles held no heat or
swelling flow, no depth of hope
or heft of spirit.

The child's stone was lost
among the pebbles
of infinite clever uses.

And still the grown girl held
the memory of the stone
warm and pulsing in her palm.

She spent the ripening years of her life
not nurturing new beginnings
but raking through cast-off relics and jetsam,
searching for the stone.

As an old woman she wept, saturating the soil.
As faded from memory as the stone.

Children leave footprints
in peaty clay,
indentations of arches between
toes that balance and heels that drive:
tender progress,
intrepid wonder.

Plucking swamp lilies and lilting rhymes,
a boy is silenced by the discovery
of a humming ember lodged in mud.

With it folded within his deepest pocket,
the boy hurries to his shorecave hideaway,
tucking his treasure into a hollow among
double-ended feather
infinitive nautilus
inextinguishable indigo flame.

Even neap tides flood the cave,
blessed twice daily, anointed by
ocean bulge of moon, sun.

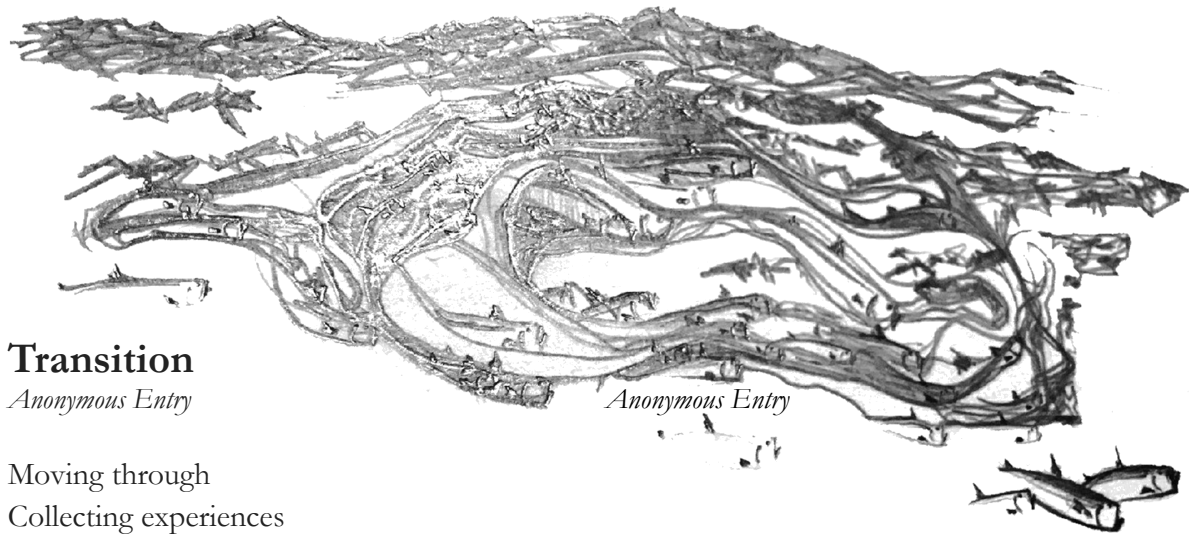
The stone burns through dormancy.

It won't be long.
On the western peaks at sunset,
reaching like love,
remembering like awakening,
the cave absorbs the stone.

The particles of a crazed twilight disperse
throughout the mountain,
sending voltaic synapses
sparkling like spent fireworks.
Each ember lights a fuse
and a volcano erupts:
ash and forgotten spirit
persist in this molten womb.



Devil's Tower // Photograph by Marleen Moffitt



Transition

Anonymous Entry

Anonymous Entry

Moving through
Collecting experiences
Carefully placing those worthy of space
Into my mind
Tucking each person and place
Deep into my heart and my memory
So many places to touch, inhale, absorb
So many people to embrace one more time

Collecting souvenirs as I pass through each moment
Collecting photos of treasured people and places as
I journey through each space
Each day
Each hour
Each moment

Slow down
Collect souvenirs for the heart and mind
Collect souvenirs for the memory

Thinking back on the past
Holding those cherished memories close
But like the photos on my phone
Some of the less than perfect are deleted
Gone forever
Replaced by the new

Slow down to savor the old even as I gather the new.

Rush on to collect
Slow down to savor
So many places to touch, inhale, absorb
So many people to embrace one more time.
Rush on
Slow down
Time
How much time?

Pockets

By Nathan Wesely

I carry you as a rock in my pocket,
Small and hiding in the stitches at the bottom.

Cradled in woven hemlock needles and withered paper
You weathered the gales of laundromat heavy-cycles.

You get wet under rain gear
And glisten with pride.

I sleep on you pressed tight
Under warm, mellifluous folds of wool
Flung together and arranged by a rooting neck.

Picking at you with fingers in lazy common spaces
I leave you gently nuzzled,
Working the detritus from your sides.

In those piles of lint you laid
Not waiting or wanting.

How did you get here?

Did I pick you up
and tuck you in the pockets of my ephemeral sweatpants?

The less I remembered
the more you grew.

Are you a crystalline form of the modulating hand of time?
Concentrated layers of passing happiness and pain?

In waves I wash over you
leaving amplified sameness.

I hide in you
ballast of shadow
Protected from rising seas.



Scott River // Photograph by Darcy Saiget

Bukit Lawang, Sumatra

By Laura Bowman

Bamboo surrounds me.

The community astounds me.

Heat rash hounds me.

And leeches abound!



*This is Rafflesia Arnoldii, a carnivorous parasite in Northern Sumatra.
It smells of rotten flesh and measures over two feet in diameter.
Like a fungi, this creature lacks leaves, roots, and chlorophyll.*

Photograph by Hasan Bowman (Age 10)

Souvenirs

By Jude Nel

What's this one from? My favorite game while cuddling Mom. Each scar, a beloved trophy—most with their own wild story Mom was happy to tell and retell upon request. Scrapes and bruises were celebrated in our household and “a sign of a good childhood.”

As our tribe of “creatures” (*my mom's affectionate name for me and my six siblings*) grew up, we slowly gathered our own scars with their own stories. We aren't generally a competitive bunch, but most of us still keep an internal scoreboard of the coolest scars in the family. Not all scars are valued the same—the better the story, the better the scar. Size and location are also factors, of course.

Starting from the youngest . . .

Emma rolled around in an impressive patch of fire sponge while free diving the Thunderball Grotto in the Bahamas. Points for location and suffering. Her whole side was blistered and burned for quite a while.

Aidan stabbed his hand on day one of his first knife. Points for depth—he probably needed stitches but decided to hide it, not wanting to risk having his new knife taken away. He also had an impressive wipeout when he was learning to longboard at age nine. At that age the scar stretched from almost wrist to elbow. Points for getting back on the longboard and skating home. Points for successfully hiding his knife wound from our very observant mom. Unnecessary, but impressive.

Mycah has a nice little scar on her bottom lip from kneeing herself in the face on one of her first backflip attempts. Points cause that thang was deep and quite a healing process. Points cause there was a fair amount of blood AND her backflip looked awesome. Also points because I feel guilty for encouraging her to do it.

Jonathan has a scar behind one of his ears from Tarzan-swinging into our banister on a very long scarf when we were about five. Points for stitches and an epic entrance. I can still see it vividly.

Hunter flew down to Ecuador with my parents to pick up our adopted brother, Jonathan. They were buds right away—equally excited to finally have a brother. While playing outside their rental, Hunter fell and sliced his chest pretty good on a metal post. Points for location and brotherly bonding.

Kjira has an epic scar on her leg from a six-foot wahoo swimming up the back of our sailboat and landing its nose in her lap. We were crossing the Pacific from the Galapagos to French Polynesia and were satellite messaging people for advice on that one. Points for location. Points for that fish feeding us for weeks to come.

My mom . . . Where to begin? A lifetime of wilding has left her with a beautiful collection of scars. My personal favorite is actually two scars—an entry and an exit point on her calf. She was walking to or from school as a kid along the top of a wall lined with tall metal spikes. ****SKIP THE NEXT BIT IF YOU HAVE A WEAK STOMACH**** A gust of wind made her lose her balance—and there she was, hanging upside down by her own leg from one of those spikes. Points for self-rescuing, points because the entry point is the size of a dime and numb to this day. We pretty much give her all the points for that doozy.

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Now that I've set the score, I guess I'll humbly brag a little about my own favorite scar . . . *because you're asking*. On the outside of my left knee, small but mighty, I have a souvenir from a monkey attack.

I was eighteen and our family was living on our sailboat full-time at this point. We had some family friends from Idaho visiting us for Christmas. We were sailing them down the Panama coast near Portobelo and stopped in Linton Bay for fuel. It was remote and surrounded by thick jungle. We wanted to stretch our legs and were looking for some entertainment for our friends. The nice man we bought fuel from pointed to a small island and encouraged us to check it out. People lived there at some point, but it was home to a bunch of monkeys now—and our guests wanted to see monkeys.

We loaded up the dinghy and headed over with cameras. The crew was comprised of me, my buddy Kiffin, my younger sister Mycah, her friend Kenedi, and our little brother, Aidan. Our troop offloaded on a small beach and securely tied our dinghy to a coconut tree. As we started to explore, we gave the monkey newbies our best monkey advice. Something like, "Don't worry, just follow us—we know what we're doing."

We wandered through several abandoned buildings, peeking into each room—no monkeys were to be seen. We slowly walked closer to the thick jungle, scanning the trees as we went—no monkeys. After twenty minutes or so, we convened in the shade of a large tree on the edge of the forest. We apologized to our eager guests and suggested that we head back. Right on cue, a spider monkey appeared. And lucky us, he was walking straight toward us . . . only maybe a bit too confidently—shoulders back and with a bit of a strut. *Not normal monkey behavior*. Kenedi and

Kiffin cooed at it. I made eye contact with my siblings—we all knew it was time to head back.

"Let's head back," we calmly told our guests. Not buying the "calm" in my voice, my buddy Kiffin's eyes sparked with fear. There were more monkeys approaching, some walking confidently and others swinging aggressively through the trees. I followed up with a reassuring, "Don't worry, it'll be fine. Just don't run—it'll freak them out." A monkey landed on a branch above Kiffin's head, springing down toward her and baring its teeth. Kiffin shrieked, turned around, and started running in the general direction of our dinghy.

The monkey followed. But he didn't just follow—he chased her with his arms wiggling forward and backward straight above his head like a cartoon. *Not normal monkey behavior*. Kiffin fled—screaming, crying, praying to god for help, and scolding the monkey periodically. Aidan and I followed at a fast walk, trying to keep the pair of hopping monkey friends trailing behind us happy. Between suppressing giggles, we tried to convince Kiffin to stop freaking out. Fifteen feet ahead of us, she ran till she was swimming—abandoning her assailant on shore.

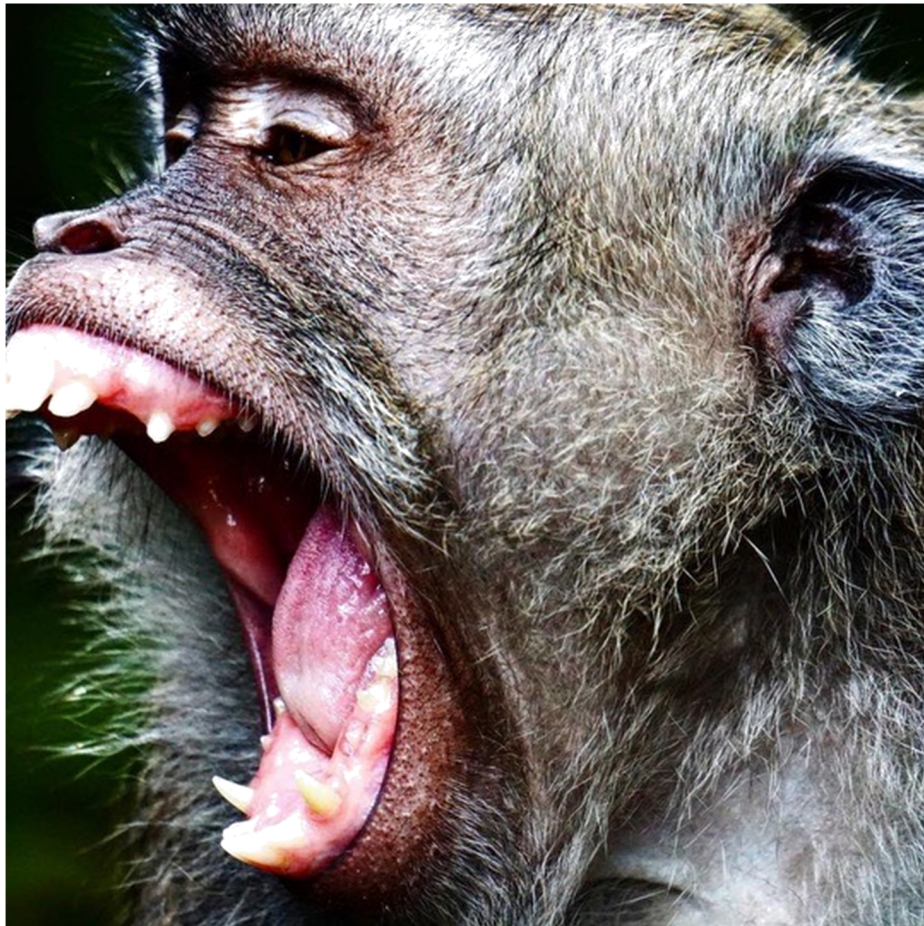
Unfortunately, I was the next person that monkey saw. Also unfortunate in that moment, is that Kiffin and I are the same height and have the same hair. I felt one monkey wrap around the back of my left leg and another wrap around my right—both scratching up my legs. Kiffin's monkey circled behind me and grabbed the back of my pants as the monkey attached to my left leg started gnawing. I looked over to my brother Aidan for support and saw my karma—Aidan was laughing, cackling even.

(continues on next page)

“They’re biting me!” I screamed, feeling like he didn’t quite understand the situation. Images of rabies started flashing through my mind. I swung my fists wildly behind me as I wiggled/ran forward—hoping I could shake them off and praying no more monkeys were coming from behind me. Those fifteen feet to the water are a blur. Next thing I knew, Aidan and I were standing in the water beside Kiffin. The monkeys guarded the beach and taunted us from the tree our dinghy was tied to. That’s when I realized, Mycah and Kenedi were nowhere to be seen.

I looked at Kiffin and Aidan—who were unharmed. I looked down at my bleeding leg and back to shore at our aggressors. “I’ll go,” I said, “I’ve already been bit.” I knew it was the only thing that made sense. Kenedi and Mycah needed

me. I took a deep breath and started edging toward shore. The monkeys noticed. *This was not going to be easy.* Just as I was about to sacrifice myself without a clear plan, Mycah and Kenedi appeared down the beach. They were waving and laughing and not eaten by monkeys. We cheered and began the process of untying our dinghy from the tree loaded with monkeys. With a little monkey-distracting, we figured it out and got all five of us back to the sailboat. We poured some hydrogen peroxide on my bite, slapped a band aid on it, and didn’t worry too much. Lucky for me, I never had any rabies symptoms. I do enjoy bananas and swinging through the trees every now and again, but don’t worry . . . unless you happen to see me on a full moon.



Jude’s mom went back to the island the next day to have a word with the monkeys. They greeted her aggressively. She snapped this photo before retreating.

Photograph by Belinda Govatos



Historical Cordova Quilt by Pamela Peterson

Snowglobes

By Christina L Anderson—*F/V Captains Choice*

It sat on the corner shelf of Grandma's kitchen
The rounded glass filled with dancing gingerbread men
But it was the smells of her baking & low humming voice
That made me feel loved

It sat up high above the wood saw in Grandpa's shed
The rounded glass filled with tools of every kind
But it was the sandpaper he handed me with a smile
That made me feel creative

(continues on next page)

It sat in the library, directly between the personal transformation books
The rounded glass filled with a colorful skull
But it was the Día De Los Muertos/Day of the Dead
That gently reminded me to honor the spirit of passed loved ones

It sat on the mantel of their roaring stone fireplace
The rounded glass filled with wintery trees, buildings, children, snowmen and a train
But it was my hometown, my birthplace, that I could only see
That gave me happy reasons to visit . . . if only once a year

It sat in the office, on the waxed mahogany desk
The rounded glass filled with our earth—moon and stars
But it was the brightly colored galaxies within the universe
That reminded me that life's problems are really pretty small

It sat in the middle of the basement table
The rounded glass filled with Disney characters
But it was that Goofy character dancing some silly Irish jig
That guided me back to my childhood memories

Snowglobes of life . . . what do you see in them?



My Winter View---Acrylic on Plexi by Darla

Souvenirs - a Story of Two

By Barbra Donachy



Cherry Salmon Beach Postcard by Jack Donachy

I have moved . . . a lot. My souvenirs tend to be small, and they have to pass the test of bringing me joy when I look at them. Otherwise, they are not worth the trouble of packing and unpacking, a task I have managed sixteen times over the years.

Eskimo polar bear yo-yos, beautiful hand-blown Japanese sashimi plates, scrimshawed balen made by an Inupiat artist friend, and a collection of Japanese fishing floats gifted to me when I lived on the Alaska Peninsula have each made the cut.

I learned about these floats when I was first dating Jack, who has admired them since he was a kid. He loved the idea that these fragile glass spheres had been carried on ocean currents across the vast Pacific from the exotic land of Japan. He's dreamed of finding one of these treasures himself ever since he first encountered them at the age of eight.

When he lived in Astoria, Oregon, we went together to a small shop where we happened upon a pretty good-sized float about fifteen inches

in diameter. It was a lovely blue-green color, perfectly round with little air bubbles permanently frozen in the glass. Jack had explained that prior to the invention of plastics, the floats were used to suspend Japanese fishing nets. Later, I read that large groups of fishnets suspended by these floats were set adrift to catch fish. Some of these groups contained 50 miles of net! As a result of storms, many floats were torn free. Ocean currents carried them in a great circular pattern throughout the North Pacific. To the pleasure of beachcombers in the Pacific Northwest, for decades many of these floats have been cast upon North American shores.

The idea of these fragile relics traveling on their own is somehow romantic and inspirational. When you find one, you feel like you have a connection to all of those salty adventures—sunshine and doldrums, typhoons, 30-foot seas, torrential rains, weathered Japanese fishermen, wooden-hulled boats. Even seeing one in a store evokes a sense of magic.

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A few years ago, we went on a bicycle trek, our course following the coast of Hokkaido. Thinking that maybe some of these floats would have made their way back home, as we pedaled along, we often scanned the beaches for bear tracks and glass floats. Several sets of bear tracks. No floats.

Early one morning, we pulled over at a beach to watch fisherman casting into the surf for Sakuramasu, Cherry Salmon. We found a big, sun-weathered driftwood tree trunk to lean our bikes against and to sit upon while we dug our feet into the cool sand, enjoyed our onigiri breakfast and watched the anglers in their endless cast-and-retrieve rhythms. One of the guys hooked a nice fish and we cheered him on as he brought the salmon in, silvery and very bright like the Coho of Alaska.

Once we finished breakfast, we pulled out our binoculars and engaged in our usual scan for floats. Having performed this act countless times to no avail, a good bit of doubt was mixed in with hope. "But wait! What's that?" I asked myself as way, way out toward the limit of the binoculars' capability, I thought I saw a speck of bright ocean-blue on the buff-colored sand.

I handed the binoculars to Jack to see what he thought. Without a word, he handed the binoculars back to me and took off running. On the return jog, he was wearing a big grin. The float was small but perfect. Best of all, we had found it! And yet, there was something about Jack's smile that suggested a tinge of disappointment. He was happy "we" had found a float, but he had really wanted to find one himself.

I smiled at him. "Well, where there's one, there might be another," I cheerily suggested. So, he took the binoculars and went through the exercise, again, meticulously scanning for ocean-blue against the ocher-colored sand. Suddenly, he thrust the binoculars at me and took off running, again not saying a word. He ran quite a bit further than the first time and returned with not only another small blue float but, more importantly, with a triumphant smile. An 8-year-old's dream at long last realized!

Along with a few other special souvenirs, we still pack the several floats we've received as gifts. But if the other floats all went away, it'd be OK. The two we found that morning on Cherry Salmon Beach in Hokkaido are the keepers.



Gus' Souvenirs // Watercolor & Ink by Sergei Bogatchev



Photograph by Chris Byrnes

My Empty Shelf

By Mike Towle

There are many things for which to yearn that would certainly make life better,
Once acquired they become our *own* to add to the infinite clutter.

Every blank must be filled, there is no room for empty space.
A quiet moment must be broken, every silence permanently erased.

Onward. Upward. More. More. More! Until we are content.
Still room here, and still more there. No time to find room to rent.

But in my head, I keep a place I save just for myself.
A place for me to keep my imagined nothings, upon an empty shelf.

And should life become saturated with trinkets and baubles piled higher than I can bear,
I can gaze upon my empty shelf knowing nothing will be there.

Scan to listen.



it's an audio file!

Tía Rosa. "Glass Frog." Misterio Lounge 3000. Everything & More, 2024 (*Submitted by JJ*).

A Letter from Goedele

By Jillian Gold

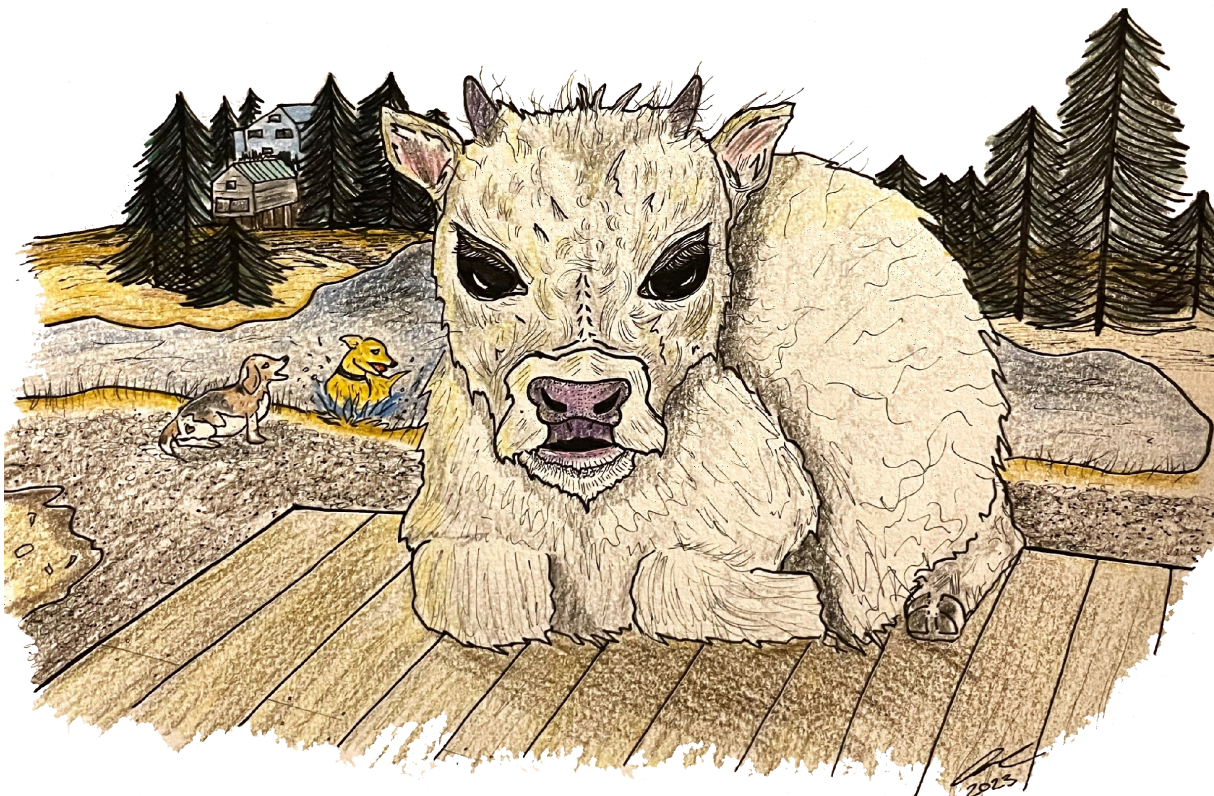
What a thrill
there among the
coupon mailer trash
my name handwritten
and yours on the return label

I slid it into my bag
like a secret
walked out of the post office
with so much purpose
calming my thumb
over the soft of an index finger
eager as it was to seek

I smiled my way home
set my bag on the gravel
nudged off my shoes
it was just the sunniest day
and I leaned back in it
on a pallet in the yard

I reached for that letter
and it didn't even matter
that inside I found
an auto insurance policy renewal reminder
that you were forwarding to me

as I sat there in the sun's warmth
grateful
for a moment of presence



Yakutat Comes Home // Pen, Ink, Colored Pencil by Alysha Cypher

The Key

By Oshiana Black

The night she was born
I will remember forever
(*but where did I put my keys?*)

The moment I looked into her eyes
All the fears of the unknown melted away

A second chance at life—I have been given a gift!
Unopened remembrances
Her own spirit-soul
Looking back at me!

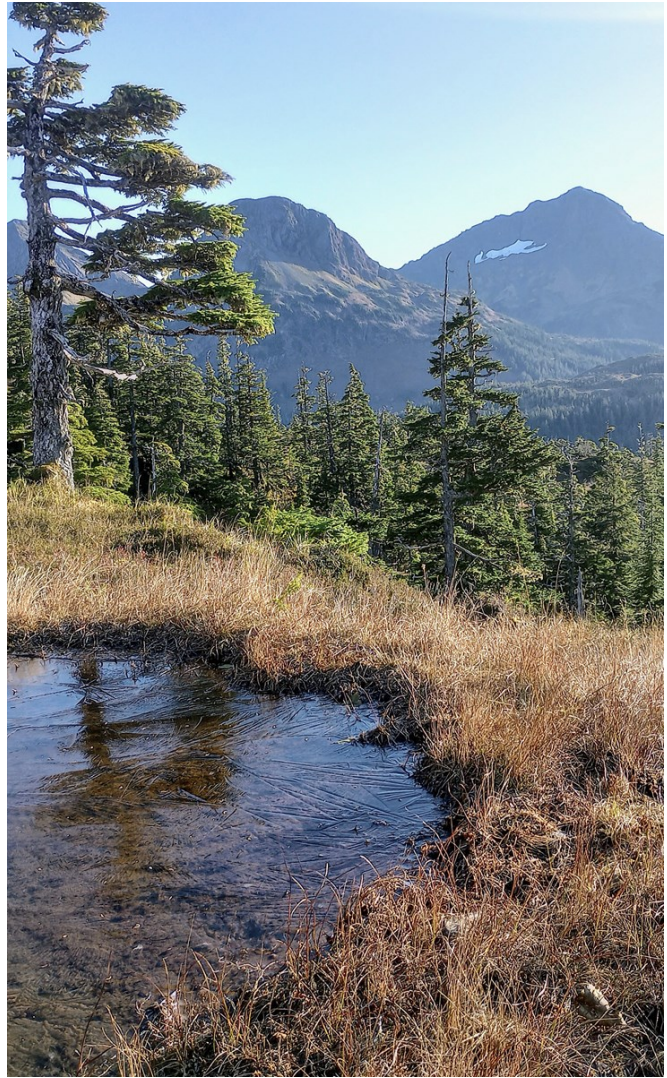
The bond between mother and child is unparalleled
It is recognition, understanding, and unimaginable happiness

Often, we are tested and we must persevere
Intense feelings, deferred dreams,
Disappointments, and losses are all real

Tragedy challenges and strengthens the love
Proud tears boil over and become insuppressible
Joyous, boisterous laughs
The secret giggles of warm snug embraces

When the blanket of darkness covers the earth
The moon's light reminds us we are not very big
It is the memories that will last
Not the foam keychains floating in the ocean

Her eyes made me realize that the keys I am searching for
Are the keys to my heart.



Photograph by Brian Varner

Restored

By Cristina Vican

Seeking the closure of the fissure in my heart
Which has been
Leaking out love from every part
Struggling to keep it all in
With the broken shards
Warding off the confusion of how and why—
Shutting down the chatter of earth and sky—
Thinking I need to find each tiny sliver—
Fighting back the sharp cold, shiver—
It's impossible—
Too many bits
No way to repair, no fixing it—
Giving up the hopeless task—
I sit back—
I ask—
"Can You Help?"—
No sound . . . save a sigh from deep within yet beyond me
I melt in warm ease
Leaving it all be
Then, like a shatter played backward on an old film reel
My Heart comes together
This is how I *Heal*



Photograph by Tina Yo-Ma

Fatherhood

By Brian Wildrick

Yo, I had mad reasons
Feeling SAD every season
Took the blame for my dad leaving
Though I know
I was better off
Just latch-keyin'
A tough spot
My kids will never been in
What's the point of having kids
If you never see 'em?

Nah, I take 'em by the hand
Show 'em both what it takes to be a man
I'll do whatever I can
Like volunteer to drive the van
I will always be their biggest fan
Leading the cheers
So proud
It brings me to tears
Through the years
Glad I kept the souvenirs

Since their first breath
They had all the heart in my chest
No emptiness
Only success, when there's an empty nest
No more back and forth, I pay respect
I show my child support
Spectate from the stands, whatever the sport

On the right track
Never keeping score
I'm breaking the cycle
And passing the torch
Hear footsteps on the front porch
Welcome home, there's an open door
Gotta show my forefathers
What a father's really for



Photograph by David Saiget

Perceptions

By Tina Yo-Ma

November: Constant rain,
Abundant potholes on
Dark glacial rock roadways,
Chugach Mountains rise high,
Touching sky.

Spawning salmon in cold waterways,
Provides sustenance,
For animals and people alike.
Moose, Bear, Swans,
Beaver, Eagles, Sea Otters,
All flourishing.

Gorgeous landscapes.
Glaciers melt before
My mournful eyes.
Eagles, bountiful as
Sparrows in the Lower 48.

Fresh enormous bear tracks stomp down the newly fallen snowflakes.
Toenails, thick as spikes.
He heads left,
We trek to the right on the mossy climb
Overlooking Sheridan Glacier.

Alaskan thick moss resembles a Serta mattress.
Makes falling a secure cushion,
On our descent.
Grabbing trees for support.

Alberta M. captures
A special place in my open heart,
As I wrap her in love.
Talents abound.
Art, music, creativity,
Resourcefulness, perseverance.

It's called Cordova, Alaska,
A new frontier
For a Midwesterner.



Pacific Sea Nettle by Mazie VanDenBroek
Encaustic Painting (*melted colored beeswax on wood*)



Photograph by Brian Varner

Headwaters to Ocean

By Nuala Rego

I.

The ageless mountains lay still,
While seasons go by, spring, summer, fall.
They tower, watching, sitting through the chill.
For the mountains, time is a vassal.

The silty rivers move fast with flow,
Rapidly moving through spring, summer, fall.
When they are covered with ice and snow
It's the land that sits and sits, waiting for it all.

It's the great, vast land that has thunder.
It's the forests where silence releases.
It's the beauty that tears me asunder.
It's the stillness that wills me to peace.

(continues on next page)

II.

The lonely lakes sit in the land,
The creatures of the land visit the marge,
Waiting for you to view, taking by the hand
All lakes, some small, some large.

We the salmon course up the rivers, then the streams,
Swimming to our ancestral creeks.
Some get caught, some arrive as if in dreams.
One is lifted out to be devoured by beaks.
The ones who survive finally die, completing their mission.
Dipnetters in a boat with a leak
Lift us high in the sky with ambition.

They will can us, in salts and sugar,
Dry us in a three to one ratio.
Eat us, not here but afar,
In rain and sun and snow.
We are the lifeblood that will continue.
We span from Russia to Canada, O! we know!
It will continue, through and through.
Mallards and harlequins and redheads -
These are the ducks of the North.
Flying from Canada and eastern oyster beds,
Migrating to the meres of the land of worth.

III.

Birds—ravens, eagles, and the wee chickadee;
Sing in their homeland, the Wild.
Flourishing with no one near, free;
Many people delight in them, especially a child.

The creatures of the North, be there many,
Watching, the land of Arctic, the land where things happen.
Domestics like Dog, Kitty, Bunny, and Henny;
Live here too, while their claws sharpen.
Lurking at night, Kitty kills the Sparrow;
The poor bird's bones are turned to marrow

Nuala Rego is a second-generation Alaskan from upriver, living between Mount Sanford and the Mentasta Mountains.

*This past summer she came to Cordova as part of the Copper River Stewardship Program,
which teaches students about the ecosystems of the watershed and its surroundings.*

Headwaters to Ocean is a poem inspired by Nuala's learning experiences with CRSP.

Darcy Yager

By Polly Keats



Tibetan Sand Cat // Oil Painting by P. Payne

The craziest story that happened to me in school? Yes, definitely. I come from a small town; there were about forty kids in my grade. This would have been in sixth grade, which is a crazy time in a lot of ways.

This kid Chris was dating this girl, Darcy. They were sixth-grade dating, which people think is sweet but is actually just confusing. For instance, I came home one day in sixth grade and announced to my mom that Davey Sidoroff was dating me, but I wasn't dating him. I don't really remember saying this, but my mom brought it up constantly a few years later when Davey Sidoroff and I were actually dating each other. And then later Davey Sidoroff was dating me and, once again, I wasn't dating him—but that's another story. Like I said, *confusing*.

Anyway, Chris was my second cousin, and Darcy was very pretty. For one thing she was blonde which, when you're in sixth grade in a small town, is very, very meaningful. For another thing, there are some people who just seem to have things figured out, and no matter how much

you secretly imagine them falling down the stairs or crying alone in the woods, they don't. And they smile gracefully at you, and you realize that maybe you're the twisted one. Darcy was one of these, at least before all of this. Afterwards, I thought she probably was more twisted than me, but maybe not.

So, the week before spring break, I heard that Chris and Darcy broke up. They didn't sit together at lunch—Darcy sat with her friends, and Chris sat alone. Because he was family, I went to check in on him, and I saw him petting his cat, on his lap, in school. I said something like, “You can't bring your cat to school!” And I'm embarrassed to admit that I may have finished by threatening, “. . . or I'll tell!”

Chris looked up at me and did that *boy-face* thing where he didn't want me to know he'd been crying, but he nodded and scooped up the agreeably limp cat and walked out of the cafeteria.

That was foreshadowing, folks.

(continues on next page)

After school as I was walking home, Chris came up behind me and tapped my shoulder. We didn't live in the same direction, so I knew he'd followed me. He wasn't holding the cat.

"Can I tell you something?" he asked in his quiet voice. He was a quiet kid.

"Is this about the cat?"

"Darcy killed my cat." He looked at me to see what I was going to do. I probably looked exactly like you'd think I looked.

"This afternoon?" I asked, but I was pretty sure we were beyond facts at this point.

"Yesterday, Darcy cut its head off with a knife."

"What?!" I yelled and backed away.

"She did!" He was suddenly shouting at me, "She did! She did! And mom doesn't believe me!"

His eyes squinched together. He dropped his face and ran away from me, loping unevenly with his arms straight out in front like a zombie. He still managed to stumble into a berry bush before reaching the corner and heading, I assume, for his own house down by the water.

I immediately went next door to my friend Janet's to tell her what had happened. I was still confused because—*Wasn't the cat in school? Didn't it have a head?* But he'd said, *yesterday* . . .

"I believe it. It was probably his dad," she offered. Now remember, Chris' dad was my mom's cousin, but sixth grade is a time for all kinds of blasphemies, so I eagerly agreed. "Yeah, I bet it was Jim. That's so messed up."

We didn't want to talk about it anymore. We probably ate melted cheese on toast and pretended to do our reading. That's what we usually did if we didn't have a movie.

The next day, Chris came up to me at lunch.

"C'mon, c'mon!" He beckoned me out into the hallway.

"Is this about the cat?" I asked.

His expression soured, "You don't believe me, do you?"

"What happened?"

I'm realizing as I write this, that the cat had a name, and Chris would have used the name in conversation, but I don't remember what it was. Chris' family were the sort to give their animals odd but innocuous names, like *Rudolf*. So, for the sake of reconstructing dialogue, I'll call the cat Rudolf.

"She killed Rudolf. It's why I broke up with her," he managed to get out. He was calmer than he'd been on the walk home, but his eyes still seemed twitchy. And red.

My response didn't help, "*You!* Broke up with *her?*"

"She . . ." He couldn't finish. I realized that wasn't the point and swallowed my incredulity.

"Tell me what happened."

"We were at my house after school. Kevin was out doing whatever. We were making popcorn. She picked up Rudolf, by the scruff? Of the neck?"

I nodded.

"And she says, 'I could kill Rudolf right now and nobody would ever believe you.'"

"I said, 'No, you wouldn't,' and she picked up a knife . . ."

Chris suddenly was lost to tears, right there in the hallway. I pushed him into the alcove in front of the door to the janitor's closet and he leaned into me like he was five years younger than me, and not the two months older that he actually was.

"Rudolf just kept kicking his legs, and there was so much blood. I kept trying to hold his head on, I kept trying to put his head back on, but he kept kicking . . . *His head* . . ."

I said, "Bullshit."

"Do you want to see?" he asked.

(continues on next page)

Did I want to see? Later, in college, I would read a book about a reporter who went to a small town back in Eastern Kentucky to write about poverty and survival. He described the grown-ups going to church, the boys going hunting, and the girls writing songs about gruesome accidents and murders. *Of course, I wanted to see!*

So, I objected strongly, “Yuck! Gross! No!” And followed him down the hall.

He brought me to his locker and took out, *yes*, the cat. It was curled up in the little cubby at the top. The head was attached but the soul had clearly departed.

“Look, look here,” he pointed. Abruptly, I realized the head was not attached or, at least, not naturally. It had been sewn on, crudely, with what looked like dental floss. My image now is of bunches of fur caught up in the stitches, making it look like it was wearing a weird rope around its throat. There must have been no blood, and the fur must have looked brushed or somehow normal, because I have no memory of anything else

odd about it, other than it being dead. In actuality, I probably only saw it for less than a second before I screamed and ran.

“NOBODY BELIEVES ME!” Chris bel-
lowed behind me.

Spring break happened. Janet had a copy of either *Scream* or *Scream 2*—I don't remember which—and we probably watched it ten times before my mom took me and my brothers to the city for dental appointments. When we got back, it was time for school again, and the final act in this story.

It happened, like everything else, in the cafeteria. It was the first day back, and I hadn't called or visited Chris or even, I realize, told my mom the crazy story that he'd told me about Darcy. I don't know if I even told her about the cat at all. It's weird how kids all know everything that's happening in town with other kids, and none of what's happening with adults, and when you get to be an adult it's the reverse.

I was talking to someone about my trip to the city—I'd *gotten a new jacket*—when people started looking over my shoulder towards one end of the room.

Chris was standing on a table, holding the cat in his outstretched arms. He lifted it over his head.

“DARCY YAGER CUT THE HEAD OFF MY CAT!” he screamed, and then he repeated it, and then he repeated it again. He started waving the cat as the phrase became a chant. The cat looked bad—I later heard it stank—after a week and a half in his locker. Some kids told the story that one of its legs fell off and bounced on the table. Other people said it was dripping maggots.

(continues on next page)



Decapitated Cat

Watercolor & Ink by Jude Nel

What I should have done, I know now, is look to find Darcy, because that would have answered a lot of questions that I never wanted to ask out loud. I wish I could say how her face looked as Chris accused her—*Confused? Disgusted? Terrified?*—I heard every one of these versions later on and I still don't know which I believe. She must have reacted. She must have carried that reaction with her for the rest of her life. I just . . . didn't see it.

Chris kept on yelling, over and over again, until Mrs. Richie came up behind the table and bear-hugged him out of the room. The last we heard was one final holler, “AND NOBODY BELIEVES ME!” And then he was gone.

We heard he'd gone to an insane asylum. At the end of the school year his mom and his little brother left town too and were never heard from again. Jim, his dad and my mom's cousin, stayed in their house and became a drunk; he died two years ago from a heart attack.

One thing about living in a small town is, when you're there you kind of hate everybody, and after you leave you love them with all your heart. I looked up Chris' little brother, Kevin, on Facebook; he's a produce buyer for a big grocery store in Seattle. He told me that yes, Chris did go to a mental hospital for a while. Eventually he got a job with a logging outfit and got hurt badly a couple of times. His story never got better. He overdosed in Sitka back in 2015.

Darcy Yager, I've never wanted to look up or see again. I don't know why. Some people you just don't want to talk to, I guess. I hear she's in real estate. *Whatever.*

With what happened to Chris afterwards, it's easy to assume he cut the cat's head off himself and that's pretty much what everybody believed, even at the time. The story was of a quiet kid who went crazy and, thank god, never hurt anyone else. *You get these all the time*, we're told. Pay no attention to the crazy things they say, just get them “help” so they won't bother the rest of us innocents.

But I think of the girls in the book about Kentucky, twelve years old like we were, writing songs about bloody weddings and runaway wagons and I think, *who knows?* The reporter wrote that book to show how depraved the “hillbillies” are. *But doesn't it seem sort of normal when you think about it?* Kids are bloodthirsty monsters. That's why they love Stephen King and Grand Theft Auto. Maybe we're only that way until we learn to love things that can die.

Somebody cut Rudolf's head off, probably somebody twelve years old. Maybe it wasn't the one who we drove out into the wilderness. *Maybe the next killer is you.*

Okay, how is this story about a souvenir? The cat, obviously. Sometimes when I tell it, I forget to point out—*It's a breakup story.* Chris carried that cat with him, even after it was lost. I wonder about his time in the woods—*Was the cat still with him then?* I wonder about when he died—did he look up from his syringe as the breath stopped in his chest, and see a little pointy-toothed skull? I wonder if he saw a knife in his own hand, or if he saw kicking legs, or just that blood-lit moment when the brilliance of dating the most beautiful girl in the sixth grade faded into the cold, dark tunnel of life.

*Like this story, Polly Keats is a work of fiction.
Because all names are changed, eventually . . . and no one is innocent.*

Suicide Knob

By Steve Schoonmaker
F/V Saulteur

Sunlight
angles low
through my window's
frosted frame
as dusty sunbeams
spotlight
a not discarded thing

A point of control
an extension of me
An old suicide knob
now relinquished to be
letting go of the wheel
as the Compass swings free

The Carcass remains
of corrosion's release
seized to a cease
and not spinning free
worn by my hand
by the Sky
and the Sea
an old suicide knob
an extension of me

It's the spin of the wheel
this extension of me
Man matched machinery
pulling nets from the Sea
harvesting Salmon
for others to eat
When memory's a muscle
and extraction's a job
with a predator attached
to a suicide knob

Corroding ball bearings
and shoulder ball joints
spinning with props
at maneuvering points



Photograph by Steve Schoonmaker

At the point of control
in making a set
in running the cork line
or retrieving the net
It's for Bowpicker ballet
where the stages are wet

It's Glove rubbed in
Fish blood
and fresh Salmon slime
rotating like Earth
and the killing of time
without power steering
in the winds of its grind
in the drift of the Ocean
with the drifts of the mind

This mind-muscle memory
an extension of me
At the point of control
in fulfilling my needs

A souvenir left
of a long killing spree
all the decades of spinning
this extension of me
Like stove ash
and spent cash
now relinquished to be
Letting go of the wheel
as the Compass swings free

A not discarded thing
this extension of me
a mind-muscle memory
still smelling the Sea
Sometimes
still triggering
nostalgia in me
When it no longer
worked

And I ended its job

And I finally
let go
of that suicide knob.

Nothin' but Souvenirs

By Jason Scott

Cheer? Memories here? Nothin' but Souvenirs.

Miss those days when someone would just drop in on ya . . .

Magic would happen and memories would just start formin' on ya . . .

Twinkle of lights . . . Dark nights with Christmas lights . . .

Nostalgia comin' alive in front of ya . . .

Creating times that would live with ya . . .

So one day when you are all alone . . . Memories would pick on ya . . .

Speaking into your mind . . .

Is life worth livin' . . . If no one is livin' with ya?

Spirits were fun when friends were drinking with ya . . .

Now, drinkin' all alone and it's just diggin' at ya . . .

Singing at the top of your lungs . . .

But nobody's singing with ya . . .

Soon, jumpin' in bed . . . But no one is cuddlin' with ya . . .

What's the sense of livin' . . . If it's just ya?



Photograph by David Lynn Grimes

Where I'm From (Joe Hazelwood)

By Nuala Rego

I am from mistakes,
From accidents and recognition.
I am from oil spills.
I am from clean-up crews.
I remember the grating sound of metal and gushing oil and harming wildlife.
I stand for taking responsibility
For my mistakes and trying to fix them.
I am from creating new regulations.
I apologize to the people of Alaska for my biggest mistake.
I'm from the Exxon Valdez.
And my name is Joe Hazelwood.



Untitled // Watercolor & Ink by Polly Keats



After the Coal Rush

Jack Donachy



Never Going Back [Ice-fishing, Lake Kawaguchiko, Japan, c. December 1982.]

Photograph by Jack Donachy

* * *

*For a time, Clarion County, Pennsylvania was the nation's 10th leading coal producer . . .
Delivered by train, the coal fired the finest steel plants in the world, Pittsburgh plants. A lot of that steel was then
rail-freighted to Detroit where the world's most wonderfully affordable automobiles were being made. It was all good.
And then one day . . . it wasn't like that anymore . . .
. . . it was never like that . . .*

Peeling paint screen door
slaps against wood
if you're going to live here
go cut a switch
you need to understand
how the burn pile works
go to your room
stringer of fish

first grade show and tell
look in the mirror
plastic tractor broken wheel
go wash your face
coal tipples, spilly piles
acid river stunted fish
keg parties pickup trucks
breath turned to mist

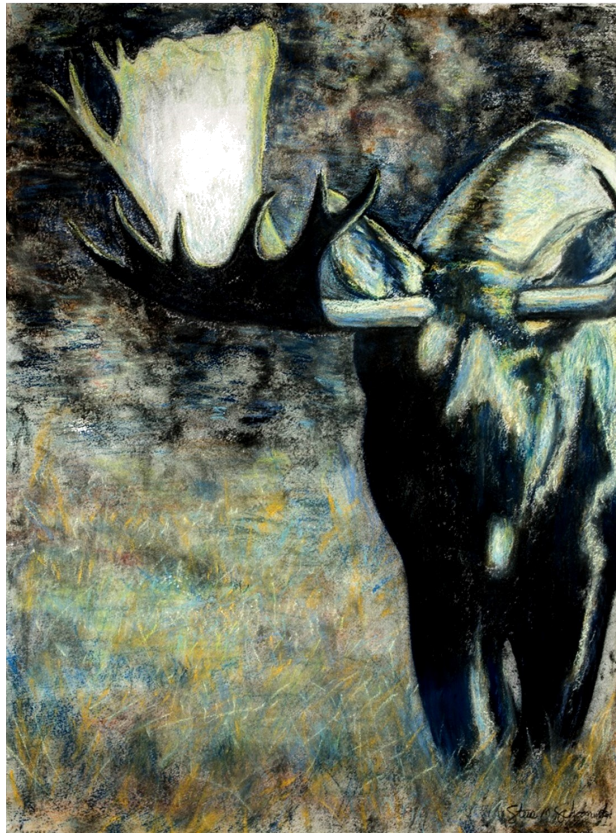
grandfather's coffin
digs into bone
one-eyed jacks
suicide kings
bury the dog
take it to the burn pile
it isn't yours
ruined land rusted rails
stringer of perch
jb swinging
from an apple tree
plastic tractor
broken wheel

keep the sunnies
shiners go back
nango gunned down
on the interstate
sit right there
and don't you move
if you leave
make sure it's for good
cut it all down
don't say goodbye
plastic tractor with a broken wheel

* * *

The Spot

By Steve Schoonmaker—*F/V Saulteur*



Here He Comes // Pastels by Steve Schoonmaker

Over a land of yellow and red, around bogs where horses are led
To the sounds of brush against pack, to the creaking of saddle and tack
In a valley a day's walk away, in the willows a cast antler lay
Where the quiet continues to be, where the Magpie awaits patiently

Steps a pony at a slow steady pace, rides a hunter from a faraway place
Up a trail where the moss meets the Sky, over red, open country, up high
Down a rutted Caribou trail, where the hog's back grows a spruce tail
Under vees and the calls of goose, in the calling time of the Moose

Flicks a fire, a dark grassy slough, grazing horses in night shades of blue
By a swamp where the gold willows thin, a black bull tests for sex in the wind
When the cold Moon clears the ridge with a shine, to the thrash of the brush and the tine
Where the shadows can blend away, nearby him his seven cows lay

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Four ponies stand frosty back sleek, in the Moonlight and mist by the creek
Where saddles are stacked across poles, where a fire pit cools to white coals
An alarm rings and then clangs a pot, speaking metal to the woods that are not
Over blue flames some coffee brews up, where Fall dawn pulls the steam off a cup

Dies the hiss of a lantern that's hung, when the packs and the rifles are slung
Where a shrike sits aloft in a tree, on the hunt for a bird or a bee
The wild meets with all of Sky's breadth, what's born there belongs there, till death

A bull stands, where grass turns to hair, his rack's back, his lips flick the air
Fall Sun warms where cow has just wet, with ears back she plays hard to get
Where his status broadcasts on the winds, at the crack of a spruce that he pins
In the still that motion was clear, in the flick of a bedded cow's ear
In the flash of an antler nearby, in the light of the new morning Sky

On a hillside, a guide gives a nudge, and a cloth clears a lens of a smudge
Where long eyes look down a hog's back, when a number's assigned to a rack
When heartbeats pound out of a chest, where instincts inside aren't suppressed
In the shadows that fall from the peaks, in the water that churns in the creeks
It's in the Wolves, in the Weasels, and Char, and in the boots that cross the creek's bar

At the gentle front of a breeze, in a golden flurry of leaves
Lies a big one, with the cows that he he's claimed, all his rivals now run off or lamed
Where he waits out the spoils of his prime, when the wind says, *It's almost her time.*

Where a hunter is watching out front, when a roll of bark gives a grunt
Where a challenge is met by a bull, where he fills a small clearing full
Where the crack of a rifle echoes, when the last of life in him goes

A Raven tucks into a roll
Where a bull meets the Sky, as a soul

When the land is yellow and red, in the photos of hunter and dead
Lie the antlers spreading so great, lie the horse loads of meat for the plate
At the wane of a chase and the thrill, where the quiet's surrounding a kill

When Magpie's shrill chattering cry
Marks the spot
Where a bull joined the Sky.

Body Parts

By Jeanie Gold

This material body that we wear
is a remarkable type of habiliment.
It's extraordinary in myriad ways,
yet also finite and limited.

Costumed in a living, breathing garment
with its countless coordinated intricacies;
Providing miraculous endowment
along with obscured transparencies.

For a long time, I took this physical dwelling for granted
and its capacity to contort and bend, rebound and mend.
For a long time, a portion of my identity
was anchored in perceptions of youthful vitality.

Throughout younger, earlier times
in my stronger, more able-bodied prime,
Healthy ways and means prevailed
and continue today in approximate scale.

Yet, despite all this, changes have come
and in my latter sixties, a deeper grappling's begun.
With a metamorphosis of body parts underway,
I work to make peace with age, each day.

I find comparison of the human body to an automobile
to be a helpful metaphor with an Achilles' heel.
Each starts out sparkling new
and stays that way for many years through.

Yet, over time, no matter how well the care,
the vehicle we drive, like the vehicle we wear,
shows aging signs of wear and tear.
And, like it or not—no one is spared.

I'm regularly tested and invited to stretch
the body-attachments my mind has sketched.
It's humbling, I find, residing in physical stead
and humor's become a much treasured friend.

So, gradually . . . I am learning
to take these changes less seriously
and to remember that temporarily,
inhabiting this body—

—*Is the fabulous, infinite, ageless me!*

Dans La Vie...

By Simone Raymond

Dans La Vie...

Il y en a
plein des choses,
qu'on peut donner
beaucoup des roses.

Les souvenirs
du mal et bon.
Les lumières
qui sont resplendissant.

La lune, les étoiles,
la nuit profonde.
E toutes les leçons
que nous appelle du nom.

Le soleil que brille,
le jardin du cœur,
qui nous donne
les veloutés du bonheur.

Le fleur de l'âge,
et de la jeunesse.
Le pomme d'hiver
et aussi la pêche.

Sur les montagnes de la joie,
dans les vallées de la tristesse.
On tombe des fois,
et découvre de la finesse.

In Life...

*There are
plenty of things,
for which one can give
bundles of roses.*

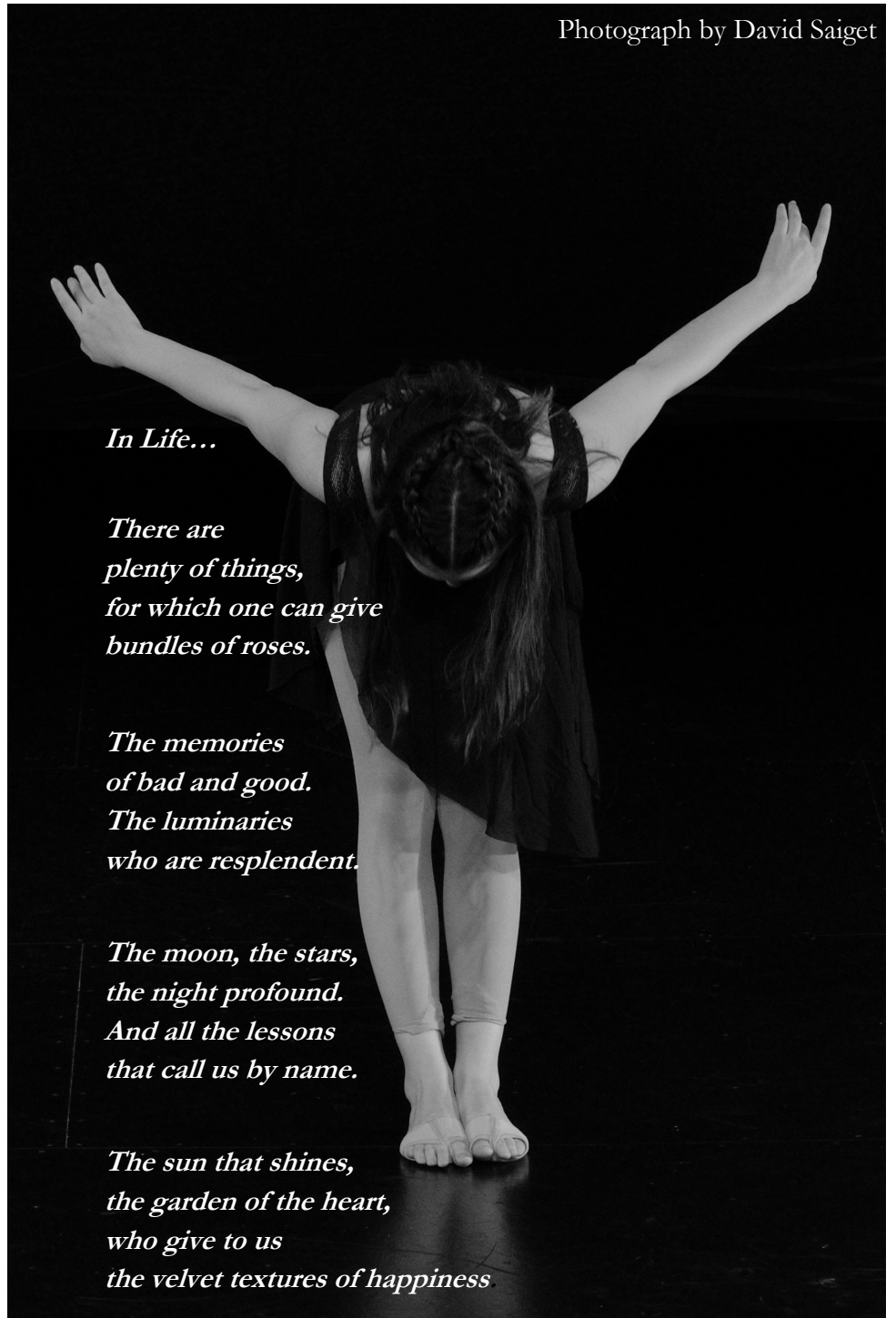
*The memories
of bad and good.
The luminaries
who are resplendent.*

*The moon, the stars,
the night profound.
And all the lessons
that call us by name.*

*The sun that shines,
the garden of the heart,
who give to us
the velvet textures of happiness*

*The flower of age
and of youthfulness.
The winter apple
and also the peach.*

*On the mountains of joy,
in the valleys of sorrow.
One tumbles sometimes
and discovers finesse.*





Visits with Jasper: Winter

By Charlie Carté

Clouds covered the sky and, with it, the soft fall of snow, much to Alice's chagrin. Snow was familiar to Alice, though she detested it.

Snow. Always with the snow these days, Alice was sick of it. The squirrel's paws pressed indentation after indentation, hardening the pads of her paws. The snow falling to her maroon fur slowly melted away and brought a shiver down her back.

This won't do, she decided. Alice had had it with the snow-covered roadways, ice-sealed ponds, and blistering cold that held to her paws like dust clinging to cobwebs. Sitting on her hind legs, she swiveled the woven satchel to face her. Inside the satchel lay the human souvenir she had stored away to show her friend; atop sat two pairs of expectant winter accessories: paw-mitts and boots, interwoven with moss and fledgling feathers. She slipped the boots on and pushed the mitts onto her paws.

The warmth was an appreciated gift. Checking the satchel to ensure her prized possession wasn't jostled, she replaced the pouch to her back. The snow falling so heavily meant she was now sure to be late to Jasper's.

As a squirrel, Alice could easily traverse the area by treetops, but the added weight of her satchel proved to be more than enough to disrupt her balance. She had decided to walk most of the way, especially since Jasper's home was hard to spot from above.

Jasper lived in a cavern on the other side of the forest. The cave itself was a large hole in the ground, mounded out with the help of the vole family a few trees down from Jasper. Finding the hole was a task in itself but, as a seasoned visitor of the area, Alice knew precisely which tree stump to look for that indicated the hole was nearby and to the left.

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Jasper had outdone himself in his retirement. Sconces lit the walls, molded into the cavern from clay from a nearby creek. He had put beeswax into the clay molds, adding twigs to allow a slow burn, which gave his home a mellow glow. Mushroom seats, driftwood end tables, and lush mossy pillows allowed Jasper to have quite the dinner parties if he wished.

Every week, Alice promised Jasper a visit, something she looked forward to and missed throughout the week until it came time. Early in the morning, she would wake and start the long walk to his home, arriving in time for tea and biscuits. What wonderful friendship she had kindled with this peculiar rabbit.

...

The old greying rabbit, known as Jasper, hugged Alice. He sat her down briskly on a large mushroom and took up a seat opposite her. She held the bottom of an acorn shell filled with lukewarm tea he had given her upon arrival. At the edge of the room, a candle threw shadows that danced across the dimly lit walls.

"I say, old friend, you mustn't fret about being late . . . And merely 10 minutes to boot!" assured Jasper warmly and shook his head. A pause, "I suppose it *did* allow the tea to cool completely. So, for that, and that alone, I accept your misplaced apology!"

Alice smiled sheepishly, "Oh, thank you, Jasper! I couldn't possibly be late today, not with what I found. Oh, but this dreadful weather will be the death of me!"

"Maybe so," Jasper mused, whiskers twitching, "but with it will come new growth, a new season, new beginnings. And have you taken a moment to listen? Absolute silence—peace and tranquility."

Jasper inhaled sharply, listening intently. He nodded to Alice to do the same, who grimaced and followed suit. He was right; no sound could penetrate the soft layer of fallen snow. A smile inched across her face and tickled her nose; she was impatient to share her findings.

"Oh, Jasper, you're right as always, but you must let me show you what I brought from the abandoned human bunker. It must be a piece of history!"

The old rabbit threw his paws in the air dramatically, "Can a rabbit not have 5 seconds of peace, dear girl? We will get to your silly souvenir soon enough," Jasper noticed Alice wriggle her bushy brown tail in annoyance, "for now, let us enjoy each other's company. Please, have a fresh biscuit. Made them myself this fine morning!" He shoved a large platter of squarely cut biscuits in front of her, and Alice took one graciously. Jasper nodded approvingly, setting the platter down on an end table. The old rabbit cleared his throat, "Tell me, how fares your family; how is your dear father, Isla?"

The squirrel scrunched her nose as she bit into the biscuit; she chewed thoughtfully, "Not well, I cannot lie to you, Jasper. A month ago, father was exposed to something toxic in the human bunker on an expedition with the scavenger crews. The humans left such a mess in their wake that you'd think it was the negligence of a young church mouse! He opened a bottle of clear liquid—didn't even drink, just breathed in! We still don't know what it was in the bottle, but he has been fatigued and unwell since." She sipped on the tepid tea. Talk of humans made any animal uncomfortable, but Alice was steadfast in her growing dislike; *thank goodness they were gone.*

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"Ah, yes, I am not surprised. Those poor humans consumed a great number of poisons that did more harm than good. Forgetting once they were long gone, we animals would have access to the most toxic, vile substances man could think up. I do know your father is strong and will recover in time. You have your own disregard for humans, but I, for one, was sad to see their integrity finally crumble. So many wonderful souls lost to the plight of a select few."

Alice nodded, "Those with good qualities should have been spared, I will admit . . . not that it would've been easy for them to do anyway. The old house cat from up the creek, Biscuit, enjoyed her humans' company. Said they have passion, love, and sadness abound. Usually misplaced and often confused, but some *did* have heart," she nodded for emphasis. "Jasper, Biscuit claims some humans loved the world but not themselves. They loved everything outwardly but felt nothing for their own life. Yet, so full of love, it couldn't be expressed."

"Probably because they were already full of substances and hate," Jasper mused sourly. Alice ignored the quip, though she begrudgingly agreed.

"Humans had predators on the inside, so says Biscuit. Telling them horrible, mean things, making them do horrible things to themselves and others. Biscuit said her owner's sister had demons living in her head. She thought she wouldn't amount to anything and was never ever happy. Biscuit would sit in her lap and purr, telling her everything she could be happy about . . . but all the sister could ever do was cry harder. One night, the sister ran out. She carried a bag and a letter. Methodical and planned. 'It looked final,' Biscuit said. Biscuit knew something was wrong, but no other human was home to alert. Days and weeks passed, and the sister did not return home. Biscuit's owner was devastated for months. I

do wonder what *really* happened to the sister. I hope *we* won't have demons in our heads soon!"

"Was nae a demon nor a predator, but her-self." Jasper shook his head in disapproval. "Humans evolved and forgot the essential bits of life but held fast to their innate fear instinct and turned it inward—creating inner turmoil and sadness. They had everything they could ever want, yet so few were happy. They cut themselves off from the outside, *our world*, and wondered why they were never satisfied. Soon, they started taking it away from us animals as well. They forgot themselves without the peace we find here in nature every day. Some couldn't function, turned on others, turned on themselves.

"They lost the joy of living you and I are so familiar with. They forgot how to look at the tiny, intricate details of the world. My dear friend, are we not grateful every day to wake up and feel the air on our noses, see the world's natural beauty, both big and small, and smell the aroma of freshly baked bread and roasted fall squash on Feast Day? All the wonders of the world . . . lost. And for what? A superficial reward; an idea of ego. What does that serve but the worst feelings known to man? No, humans were a curse to everything but most tragically themselves. They did not have to suffer so personally and universally. Perhaps their passing was an act of mercy."

"Mercy!?" Alice gasped, shifting uncomfortably at the thought, "A life better off dead than living? No one could possibly think that, could they? Jasper, don't be silly."

Jasper nodded solemnly, "Aye, I am more than certain many humans *did* see it as mercy. You and I could never truly understand those feelings, but don't you think we should show them grace and understanding? Suffering does a number on any mind."

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The squirrel was deep in thought, "Jasper, I could never think that way. To hate my life so viscerally, well, it's not right! No one has the right to think that way with all we are given in life!"

"Tsk, Alice, if we were to meet someone with such tribulations, would it not be best to meet them where they are and help in any way we can? The gentle hand goes farther than the heavy-handed, *hm?* Humans did lose the knack of community, of relying on others, the art of caring. This is why I care so deeply for my friends; you see. We may not be human, but suffering is intrinsic to existence, and we must be kind to all walks of life for that reason." Jasper blinked, seemingly out of a trance, "Forgive me, my dear; I did not mean to give a sermon. Now, what was it you wanted to show me?"

Alice was acutely aware of her bashfulness, "Well, now I'm embarrassed. You'll think it's silly."

Jasper remained silent, an encouraging nod. She grabbed the satchel from her booted paws and opened the clasp. Out of the pouch, she produced a small silver tube glistening in the dim light of Jasper's enclave. The base of the cylinder had a slight indent circling the rim. Upon closer inspection, as Alice moved the thing from paw to paw, Jasper could see the end of the tube round and taper in a copper-plated dome. When Alice shook it, something rattled within, like sand in a wicker basket.

"Ah," the old rabbit smiled sadly, knowing well the peculiar contraption. "Alice, perhaps you should put this somewhere safe. Look at it often. Remind yourself of this conversation and think of compassion in that moment."

"Well, what is it? Do you know?" She held the thing in her arms like her own infant son.

"Aye, it was man's downfall."



Pocket Gopher // Egg Tempera on Panel by P. Payne



Photograph by David Saiget